

Looking back at some previous historic Houston cold snaps

February 13, 2021 at 4:49 pm by Matt Lanza

With the deep freeze on the way to Houston, Eric thought it would be a good idea to take a look at some previous significant cold in Houston, so we can place this outbreak in historical context. As Space City Weather's unofficial history guru, I've taken on the challenge!

Quick forecast update

Eric's morning post does a nice job discussing what we know and expect over the coming days. Not a whole lot has changed, though I think three things stand out.

- 1.) First, there is a real chance that there could be some freezing drizzle or light freezing rain overnight tonight and Sunday morning. Please check with us or other local outlets if you are planning to travel anywhere tomorrow morning.
- 2.) Second, the start time of Sunday evening's precipitation has sped up a bit, and we may see rain or freezing rain or sleet begin as early as 3 or 4 PM on Sunday.
- 3.) It seems colder air may push in here a little faster on Sunday night and Monday morning. This is both good and bad. It's bad in the sense that we're likely to endure a longer stretch of temperatures in the mid-20s or colder. It's good, however, in the sense that this *might* lead to more sleet (or snow) and less freezing rain. Forecasting precipitation types is extremely challenging, as Eric noted this morning, so I expect more curve balls to be thrown our way between now and tomorrow evening, but at least this afternoon, it looks like sleet may be the more common precipitation type we see tomorrow night. We'll have more for you in the morning.

February 2021

So, to begin our trip through history, let's set the table with the current cold outbreak.

Current coldest forecast temperature: 10° on Tuesday 2/16

Nights forecast at or below freezing: Five

The current official NWS forecast low for Houston on Tuesday morning (at IAH Airport) is 10 degrees, which would rank as a tie for Houston's 5th coldest morning all-time (back to 1889). Since official records have been kept at Bush Airport (1969), this would rank as the second coldest, with only December 23, 1989 being colder (7 degrees).

Some may try to talk down this cold outbreak because of its less impressive duration than, say, 1989 which saw three of Houston's 25 coldest mornings on record. However, the current Monday through Friday forecast (as of Saturday afternoon) shows an average temperature of 28.5 degrees for the 5 day period. This would rank as Houston's 12th coldest 5 day stretch on record. If that does verify, it will be our

coldest 5 day stretch of weather since 1983. So this certainly qualifies as an upper echelon, if not historic cold snap.

So let's look back at some other memorable Houston cold snaps through the years.

January 2018

Coldest temperature: 19° on 1/17

Nights at or below freezing: 10, split up over 20 days

We've gotten a few comments from folks questioning how this upcoming cold could be classified as "coldest in years" when we just had cold like this in January 2018. Well, the reality is that January 2018, while impressive, was split up over 3 weeks and came with comparatively mild daytime highs.

Climatological Data for Houston Area, TX (ThreadEx) - January 2018
Click column heading to sort ascending, click again to sort descending.

Date	Max Temperature	Min Temperature	Avg Temperature	Avg Temperature Departure	HDD	CDD	Precipitation	Snowfall	Snow Depth
2018-01-01	41	30	35.5	-17.3	29	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-02	34	29	31.5	-21.2	33	0	T	T	0
2018-01-03	48	25	36.5	-16.2	28	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-04	55	26	40.5	-12.2	24	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-05	57	35	46.0	-6.7	19	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-06	66	33	49.5	-3.2	15	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-07	69	44	56.5	3.8	8	0	0.24	0.0	0
2018-01-08	66	46	56.0	3.3	9	0	0.09	0.0	0
2018-01-09	54	44	49.0	-3.7	16	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-10	63	52	57.5	4.8	7	0	T	0.0	0
2018-01-11	69	40	54.5	1.8	10	0	0.97	0.0	0
2018-01-12	49	31	40.0	-12.7	25	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-13	53	30	41.5	-11.3	23	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-14	55	28	41.5	-11.3	23	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-15	67	34	50.5	-2.3	14	0	T	T	0
2018-01-16	54	25	39.5	-13.4	25	0	0.35	0.1	0
2018-01-17	39	19	29.0	-23.9	36	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-18	38	21	29.5	-23.5	35	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-19	57	34	45.5	-7.5	19	0	0.02	0.0	0
2018-01-20	73	52	62.5	9.4	2	0	0.07	0.0	0
2018-01-21	75	65	70.0	16.9	0	5	0.52	0.0	0
2018-01-22	70	43	56.5	3.3	8	0	0.08	0.0	0
2018-01-23	65	38	51.5	-1.8	13	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-24	66	38	52.0	-1.3	13	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-25	62	33	47.5	-5.9	17	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-26	70	44	57.0	3.5	8	0	T	0.0	0
2018-01-27	66	58	62.0	8.4	3	0	0.72	0.0	0
2018-01-28	70	52	61.0	7.3	4	0	T	0.0	0
2018-01-29	67	43	55.0	1.2	10	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-30	62	38	50.0	-3.9	15	0	0.00	0.0	0
2018-01-31	71	35	53.0	-1.0	12	0	0.00	0.0	0
Sum	1851	1165	-	-	503	5	3.06	0.1	-
Average	59.7	37.6	48.6	-4.5	-	-	-	-	0.0
Normal	62.9	43.2	53.1	-	385	15	3.38	0.0	-

Observations for each day cover the 24 hours ending at the time given below (Local Standard Time).

Max Temperature : midnight

Min Temperature : midnight

Precipitation : midnight

Snowfall : unknown

Snow Depth : unknown

January 2018 had its share of cold, including our coldest morning since 1996, but we weren't able to string together a stretch quite like this week. (NOAA)

We did hit 19 degrees, which at that time was our coldest low temperature since 1996. We managed to reach the upper 30s on both days, which isn't overly impressive. That event also came with snow, sleet,

and ice. Impressive, but probably not historic.

February 2011

Coldest temperature: 21° on 2/2

Nights at or below freezing: 12 over 2 weeks

Another one we hear about is 2011. I remember February 2011 vividly because I moved to Houston for a time that month and arrived at the end of January. Quite the welcome. Houston officially bottomed out at 21 degrees on February 2nd. We registered 5 straight days with lows in the 20s from February 1-5 and 4 days from February 9-12. There was also an ice storm of sorts on the 4th. [Eric wrote about it at the Houston Chronicle](#). I actually remember forecasting this and it being a really good lesson in the challenges of forecasting winter weather in the South.

While this was not really a record-setting event in Houston, other parts of Texas saw some impressive records. El Paso's coldest February day on record was February 3, 2011. Dallas was plagued with cold and wintry weather as well, marring the 2011 Super Bowl.

December 1989

Coldest temperature: 7° on 12/23

Nights at or below freezing: 14 over 2-3 weeks

In pantheon of modern Houston cold snaps, December 1989 is front and center.



The front page of the Houston Chronicle from December 23, 1989, the day after Houston officially recorded 1.7" of snow and the day that Houston recorded the coldest December day on record. (Houston Chronicle)

Six record low temperatures still stand from 1989.

December 12: 25°
December 13: 19°
December 16: 19°
December 22: 13°
December 23: 7°
December 24: 11°

December of 1989 was Houston's coldest December on record back to the 1880s. Between crop losses and other damage, the cold of December 1989 was estimated at the time to cause \$300 to \$500 million in damage (up to \$1 billion in 2021 dollars) in Southeast and Coastal Texas, according to NOAA's December 1989 *StormData* publication. This event merits a whole post on its own, which we'll hopefully one day get to!

December 1983

Coldest temperature: 11° on 12/25

Nights at or below freezing: 12, including 11 in a row to close the month.

The December 1983 cold wave was another hall of fame event for Houston. We closed the month with 11 straight mornings below freezing, including four full days that failed to crack above 32 degrees.



Truck-bus crash is one of worst

By RICHARD STEWART
and JON VERBOON
Chronicle Staff

The head-on collision of a tractor-trailer rig and church bus that killed nine persons may be the worst traffic accident in Southeast Texas history, and investigators said Saturday they cannot explain what caused the wreck along a straight, rural road east of Houston.

Three members of one family — a woman and her two children — were killed in the accident. Two other children in the family were injured. A man and his 10-year-old son also were killed, and there were numerous injuries involving more than one member of other families, all on their way to a Christmas revival at an Anahuac church.

Both drivers and seven bus passengers were killed. Fourteen persons were injured, two critically.

The accident occurred along Texas 61 near Devers about 40 miles east of Houston about 7:40 p.m. Friday. The road is narrow, unlighted and without shoulders, and it had been driving earlier in the day, Department of Public Safety Trooper James Kirksey said. However, the highway is straight, and visibility was good, he said.

Kirksey said there were no skid marks on the road, indicating the two large vehicles probably never braked before crashing head-on at an estimated combined speed in excess of 100 mph.

"It's the worst accident I can remember in the 18 years I've been (with DPS)," Kirksey said. "I'm shocked."

Kirksey identified the driver of the tractor-trailer rig as Wallace Edward Odion, 39, of Daisetta, a small town located about 10 miles from the accident site. "He would be familiar with the road," Kirksey said. "But we haven't made a determination on the cause. They hit in the middle of the road. It looks like maybe they just weren't paying attention."

"It's a two-lane, two-way road with no improved shoulders. It had been misting earlier in the day but there was no ice on the road."

See related story, Section 1, Page 9.

"It looked like a bomb had gone off," Al Coward of the Hull-Daisetta Volunteer Ambulance Service said. "It looked like a plane crash. There was 50 yards of destruction, with bodies everywhere."

The whole front of the bus and two seats back were gone," Lynn Wells, another member of the Hull-Daisetta ambulance force said.

The Hull-Daisetta ambulance took four of the injured to hospitals in Beaumont. "We lost one on the way," a grim-faced Coward said.

He said he heard later that another child, a boy, had died in the accident. The accident, was body on arrival at a hospital.

In all, nine of the victims were taken to Beaumont's St. Elizabeth Hospital. A hospital spokesman said one was dead on arrival, four were treated and released and four were hospitalized.

A group of at least two dozen relatives, friends and neighbors gathered at the hospital Friday night, eager to find out about victims. The hospital staff ushered most of them into a private waiting room.

"People are scattered all around in different hospitals," a Jefferson County justice of the peace told Carol Richardson of Beaumont, shortly after midnight. Mrs. Richardson was seeking news of her son, John.

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Kirksey identified the driver of the tractor-trailer rig as Wallace Edward Odion, 39, of Daisetta, a small town located about 10 miles from the accident site. "He would be familiar with the road," Kirksey said. "But we haven't made a determination on the cause. They hit in the middle of the road. It looks like maybe they just weren't paying attention."

"It's a two-lane, two-way road with no improved shoulders. It had been misting earlier in the day but there was no ice on the road."

Mrs. Richardson went home to wait by the

Temple Church of God in Christ in Nome, Alaska, establishing the Lily of the Valley Church of God in Christ in Anahuac five or six years ago. Sam Harmon said Friday was to have been the fifth of a five-day Christmas revival at the church.

Harmon, 51, of China, an employee of the Lower Neches Valley Authority, said the congregations of the two churches were very close.

"Anything we had anything at our church, they were there, and anything they had anything, we would be invited," he said.

Jesse and Zola Mae Jackson, of Sour Lake, said when a friend called with news about the wreck, they feared their daughter, Diana Renée Pierre, 17, was dead.

"I thought the same as any mother, that my daughter was dead. It was just terrible," Mrs. Jackson said.

At the hospital they learned their daughter had suffered two badly broken legs. She had played volleyball and been a long-distance track runner at Hardin Jefferson High School, where she is a junior.

The couple got to see their daughter just before she went into surgery. Mrs. Jackson said. "She didn't say anything," Mrs. Jackson said.

"It don't hurt as much knowing she's alive, she's not dead. She'll make it all right," Jackson said, holding her hand.

Mrs. Jackson said the teenagers who attended the Anahuac church were a very close group. She said that for the last 2½ years her daughter regularly rode the bus to attend night meetings at the church. "All of them were very close friends," she said.

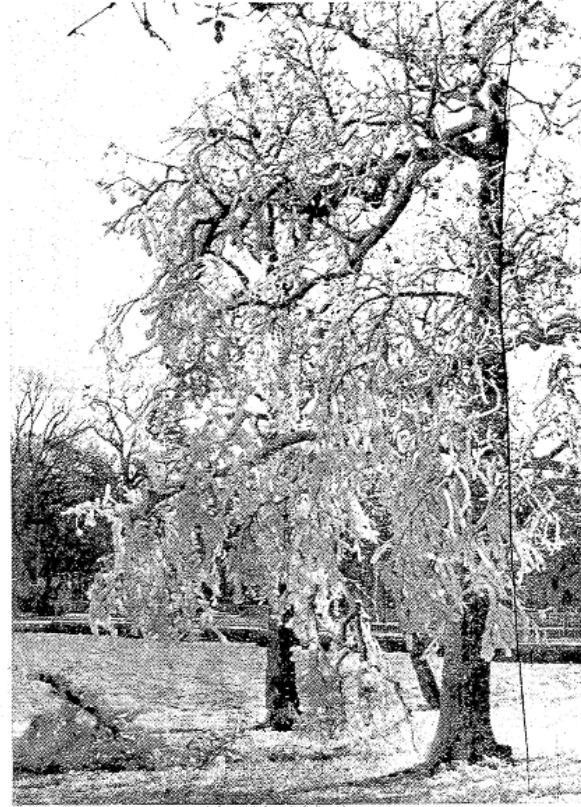
The injured were taken to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Jasper; Beaumont General Hospital, Beaumont; and St. Luke's Hospital in Beaumont; Yettilie Kersting Memorial Hospital in Liberty, and Chambers County Memorial Hospital in Anahuac.

Killed were Odion, 39, of Beaumont, and her son, Terry, 19, and Brian, 16; Sheila Thomas, 19, of Grayburg; the Rev. Donald Wade Davis, 46, of Beaumont; and his son, Kevin Davis, 19, and a

The look of winter

Three stone figures in a fountain in front of the University of Texas Medical School on Holcombe take on the appearance of ice creatures after being drenched in water during Saturday's freeze. Below, a tree in Hermann Park also put on some weight during the cold.

Photos by Sam C. Pierson Jr., Chronicle Staff



City in grips of Christmas freeze

(From Page 1)

line said. Officials of Texas-New Mexico Power, which generates power, could not be reached.

The previous December record here of 10 degrees was set Dec. 7, 1968, and Dec. 23, 1984. The previous record low for a Christmas Eve was 21, set in 1985.

Temperatures Saturday dropped to 17 in the Greenpoint Mall area, 19 in Spring Branch and 20 in West University Place.

The lowest temperatures in Southeast Texas Saturday were in Bryan and Brenham — 13. Lows in other nearby areas included Nederland, 14; Port Arthur, 14;

Galveston warmer than Alaska

Most people think of Galveston as a semi-tropical resort city and a place to escape the winter cold. But Saturday, Galvestonians could have gone to Alaska to beat the cold.

Temperatures Saturday dropped to a record 21 degrees. That's nine degrees colder than the 30-degree temperature reported in Barrow, Alaska, north of the Arctic Circle.

The Christmas morning Houston Chronicle featured pictures of fountains turned into ice sculptures in Houston. (Houston Chronicle)

The 1983 cold snap caused an estimated \$50 to \$100 million in damage in Texas at the time (up to about \$250 million today). December 1983 is Houston's second coldest December behind 1989. December 1983 was to Dallas what December 1989 was to Houston, leading to their coldest December on record.

January 1978

Coldest temperature: 21° on 1/20

Nights at or below freezing: 20 (!) over the course of the month

The January 1978 cold snap doesn't have much intensity on any single day, but it makes up for that in terms of duration, which ultimately led to 1978 being our coldest January (and coldest month) on record.

Climatological Data for Houston Area, TX (ThreadEx) - January 1978

Click column heading to sort ascending, click again to sort descending.

Date	Max Temperature	Min Temperature	Avg Temperature	Avg Temperature Departure	HDD	CDD	Precipitation	Snowfall	Snow Depth
1978-01-01	55	36	45.5	-7.3	19	0	0.10	0.0	0
1978-01-02	42	31	36.5	-16.2	28	0	0.18	0.0	0
1978-01-03	53	24	38.5	-14.2	26	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-04	63	31	47.0	-5.7	18	0	T	0.0	0
1978-01-05	73	62	67.5	14.8	0	3	0.02	0.0	0
1978-01-06	75	64	69.5	16.8	0	5	T	0.0	0
1978-01-07	77	56	66.5	13.8	0	2	0.18	0.0	0
1978-01-08	56	32	44.0	-8.7	21	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-09	44	25	34.5	-18.2	30	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-10	37	26	31.5	-21.2	33	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-11	45	34	39.5	-13.2	25	0	1.10	0.0	0
1978-01-12	40	34	37.0	-15.7	28	0	T	0.0	0
1978-01-13	48	28	38.0	-14.8	27	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-14	46	27	36.5	-16.3	28	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-15	56	29	42.5	-10.3	22	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-16	61	31	46.0	-6.9	19	0	2.06	0.0	0
1978-01-17	36	23	29.5	-23.4	35	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-18	36	31	33.5	-19.5	31	0	1.63	0.0	0
1978-01-19	33	25	29.0	-24.0	36	0	0.38	0.4	T
1978-01-20	29	21	25.0	-28.1	40	0	T	T	T
1978-01-21	31	25	28.0	-25.1	37	0	0.31	0.0	T
1978-01-22	36	30	33.0	-20.2	32	0	0.01	0.0	0
1978-01-23	45	34	39.5	-13.8	25	0	0.33	0.0	0
1978-01-24	56	45	50.5	-2.8	14	0	0.16	0.0	0
1978-01-25	49	30	39.5	-13.9	25	0	0.15	0.0	0
1978-01-26	50	29	39.5	-14.0	25	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-27	45	35	40.0	-13.6	25	0	T	0.0	0
1978-01-28	48	30	39.0	-14.7	26	0	0.00	0.0	0
1978-01-29	47	28	37.5	-16.3	27	0	T	0.0	0
1978-01-30	42	39	40.5	-13.4	24	0	0.26	0.0	0
1978-01-31	40	37	38.5	-15.5	26	0	0.28	0.0	0
Sum	1494	1032	-	-	752	10	7.15	0.4	-
Average	48.2	33.3	40.7	-12.4	-	-	-	-	0.0
Normal	62.9	43.2	53.1	-	385	15	3.38	0.0	-

Frequent fronts ushered in cold, Arctic air through most of January 1978, which led to a low to moderate intensity, but sustained cold air outbreak over Houston. (NOAA)

The 1970s had some pretty amazing winters across the United States, and for Houston this was almost certainly the peak. Although, 1973 saw four days of snow in Houston between January and February.

January-February 1951

Coldest temperature: 14° on 2/2

Nights at or below freezing: 6 in a row

January 1951 started off quite mild with 14 days in the 70s. The switch flipped on January 28, when temperatures dropped 40, and then January 29 when they kept dropping to 24 degrees. We then had four straight days below freezing all day long. The January 29-February 3 period remains Houston's coldest stretch of 6 days on record, averaging 26.3 degrees.

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FORTY-FOUR PAGES

Our City

March On Polio

THE ANNUAL March of Dimes campaign closes Wednesday night. Only hours remain, then, in which to contribute to the fight against this costliest of epidemic diseases and the only one that is on the increase in this country.

Residents of Harris County and of Texas have had greater responsibility toward the March of Dimes than other Americans. Why? Because in the past year, the remainder of the country has been helping us carry our burden, and we haven't been paying our way.

POLIO HAS BEEN epidemic in Harris County for three straight years. Polio also has been epidemic in the state as a whole.

Harris County had 218 polio victims hospitalized last year; 193 in 1949, and 313 in 1948. Of these 821 victims, 112 died.

And in 1950, Harris County will have drawn from the Central Epidemic Fund of the National Foundation for March of Dimes. Paralysis, by the time all bills are paid, is \$19,577 over and above what the county has given to the National Foundation as its half of last year's March of Dimes campaign. The county, on November 15, had called on the national fund for \$141,874 more than it had given to national head-quarters in 1950.

In other words, we haven't been paying our way.

HARRIS COUNTY and Texas should do better this year. The quotas should be met; they should be exceeded so we can catch up on our obligations.

The Houston Mothers March on Polio will begin at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday, from 7 to 8 p.m. Women will make a block-by-block canvass of the city. The March of Dimes will be held in several towns of Harris County. If the citizens of the county respond to this spectacular fund-raising campaign, the county will raise a total of \$250,000 more than the \$141,874 it gave to the 1951 March of Dimes which closes Wednesday night.

Poll Tax Paid?

ONLY 37,610, or little more than one-tenth of Harris County's eligible voters, had qualified to vote by paying

Snow, Sleet Numb County Valley Citrus Hit Hard Blow

Mothers To March On Homes

By MARSHALL VERNIAUD
Chronicle Staff

Neither rain nor sleet nor freezing cold nor weather conditions are going to prevent 12,000 Houston-area women from marching on homes in the city and Polio between 7 and 8 p.m. today.

On every block of the city—Gulf, Alief, Bellaire, Cinco City, Galena Park and Humble—these women will canvass the homes in their neighborhoods for contributions to the area's greatest March of Dimes drive.

Turned on porch lights and with high spirits, the women will tell the volunteer canvassers that the amount of money they contribute to the campaign is up to \$250,000.

Apartment building dwellers may also "give the signal" to the marching mothers by turning a porch light on and removing any other object to their door-knobs.

Most of the collectors—including a few men and youngsters who will aid the mothers—will be dressed in identification badges.

Residents who expect to be away from their homes during the one-hour march may leave their contributions with neighbors who expect to be at home. (See BE CAREFUL, Page 6)

After the block collectors have covered their territory, they will take their collections to the nearest post office. (See MOTHERS, Page 14)



Subfreezing Temperatures Grip State

By Associated Press

Blizzard conditions and a heavy blow Tuesday to the lower Rio Grande Valley citrus industry while retarding its grip on the rest of Texas.

Temperatures dipped below freezing in the valley early Tuesday day and held on stubbornly. More subfreezing readings were predicted.

Freezing drizzle was reported Tuesday in the valley, along the coast and in the Panhandle. Light snow was falling at many east and central Texas points, including Texarkana, Austin and Waco.

No Doubt of Hurt

The extent of damage to citrus and other field crops in the valley will not be known for at least a day. But the Brownsville citrus men said: "There's no doubt it's been hurt."

The forecast was for more cold weather to grip the state through Wednesday. Temperatures, which were below freezing throughout the state throughout Tuesday, were below freezing throughout the state throughout Wednesday. Temperatures, which were below freezing throughout the state throughout Wednesday, were below freezing throughout the state throughout Wednesday.

Freezing rain is predicted for the south part of East Texas and throughout the state.

(See BE CAREFUL, Page 6)

Cars Crash On Ice-Slick Roads; Low of 22 Due

By MARTIN DREYER
Chronicle Staff

Houston and Harris County shivered in freezing temperatures Tuesday after huddling through the winter's most stabbing storm of ice, sleet and rain Monday afternoon.

A low of 22 degrees is forecast for tonight and a high of 31 during the day. The freeze is expected to last through Wednesday and possibly Thursday.

Occasional freezing rain and sleet are on tap for tonight and Wednesday, the Weather Bureau predicted.

A number of county schools are closed and thousands of Houston school children stayed home Tuesday.

Many roads were iced over and Wednesday, the Weather Bureau predicted.

The damage (See SNOW, Page 7)

Mercury Sticks in 20s

The temperatures from Monday evening through Tuesday morning were as follows:

MONDAY

1 a.m. 24
3 a.m. 23
5 a.m. 23
7 a.m. 23

9 a.m. 26
11 a.m. 26

TUESDAY

1 a.m. 24
3 a.m. 23
5 a.m. 23
7 a.m. 23
9 a.m. 26
11 a.m. 26

1 p.m. 27
3 p.m. 28
5 p.m. 28
7 p.m. 28
9 p.m. 28
11 p.m. 28

Freeze Isolates Families

By ELMER SUMMERS

Toppy turvy Tuesday with the throughout the area, rural re-

January 30, 1951 front page of the Houston Chronicle, one of several days that saw the region dealing with disruption and damage due to ice and excessive cold. (Houston Chronicle)

In addition to the cold, what is likely the worst ice storm in city history led to serious damage and disruption. Almost an inch and a half of precipitation fell during the cold snap. Another event likely worthy of its own post.

January 1940

Coldest temperature: 10° on 1/19

Nights at or below freezing: 11 in a row

The 1940 cold snap came with snow on January 22nd, with up to 3 inches reported from Houston into southern Louisiana and more elsewhere in the states. Only twice has Houston seen 11 straight days of low temperatures at or below freezing: January 1983 and January 1940. The 1940 cold is notable for both intensity and duration.

January 1930

Coldest temperature: 5° on 1/18

Nights at or below freezing: 8, coming in two 4-day waves

January 18, 1930 is Houston's coldest morning on record, with a low of 5 degrees above zero. The cold came in two punches, this first strong one, followed by a second one a couple days later in which we bottomed out at 15 degrees on the 22nd.



The January 18, 1930 Houston Chronicle trumpeting the news of Houston's coldest recorded day. (Houston Chronicle)

Five days after hitting 15 degrees, we were back up near 70, so further proof it won't stay cold forever!

February 1899

Coldest temperature: 6° on 2/12 and 2/13
Nights at or below freezing: 9 in a row

The February 1899 cold snap covered most of the eastern half of the United States, and it could be deemed the granddaddy of them all in the South. Several records from that event still stand today, including the coldest on record for Amarillo (-16°), Dallas (-8°), Galveston (8°), and the Texas all-time record (Tulia was -23°, a record shared with Seminole in 1933). In addition to Texas, state records still stand or are shared today from this cold snap in Nebraska, Ohio, Louisiana, and Florida.

The February 13, 1899 edition of the *Houston Post* described the cold snap thusly:

“When a younger friend approaches him now and suggests to him, with a degree of profanity based on the length of time he has been exposed to the chilling, biting, nipping North wind, that ‘it’s pretty cold,’ the oldest inhabitant cannot yawn, draw

closer to the welcome fire, and say, with an air of conscious superiority, 'Yes, but away back in '73 there was a norther that–.' He has no recourse but to moodily assent, put a few more coals in the blazing grate and reflect on what has been, what might have been and what may be. And all this makes him sad, very, very sad."

February 1899 is front and center in the pantheon of cold as well.

February 1895

Coldest temperature: 10° on 2/8

Nights at or below freezing: 12 over the course of 2 weeks

February 1895 was a memorable cold snap, with 4 daily records still standing today. But what set 1895 apart for Houston was our greatest snowstorm of 20 inches, which we conveniently wrote about back in 2017!

The final word

So, will 2021 join these memorable cold snaps? Probably. But ultimately, whether it really can join the ranks of a 1989 or 1983 or 1899 will depend on just how cold it gets Tuesday morning.



Here's the latest on Houston's winter storm and exceptional cold

Sunday morning update: Snow likely tonight for much of Houston, followed by extreme cold

25 thoughts on “Looking back at some previous historic Houston cold snaps”

Jerry M

February 13, 2021 at 5:06 pm

So here is your next trivia challenge – when was the last time the entire continental US was at or below freezing? For a hint I think it was 1995 (or 1996)

Loading...

Keith

February 13, 2021 at 7:13 pm

I'm guessing '95 or '96

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Sam

February 13, 2021 at 5:16 pm

Remember the 1997 ice storm? It was awful and about a week long.

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Majken Pullin

February 14, 2021 at 1:51 am

I do!! No one is talking about it for some reason, but it clogged up the city

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Dennis McGuire

February 13, 2021 at 5:31 pm

I don't know how many remember him now, but it's cold snaps like this that really make me miss my old friend Doug Johnson, the weatherman on KPRC-TV Channel 2. Doug would be having a ball right now, and he would also be the most-watched personality on Houston television through this thing. We lost him in January 2019 and I sure wish he could still be here.

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Typical Poster

February 13, 2021 at 5:36 pm

Thank you Eric and Matt for all you do. Why is the fear of long words called Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia?

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Keith

February 13, 2021 at 7:11 pm

Because if it were Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophilia we would have to love the word!
Thank goodness for ctrl c and ctrl v

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Lester (who now lives in Clear L

February 13, 2021 at 5:41 pm

Dec 1989...my wife and I were living in Atascocita South (north Houston)..and I remember it well! I remember driving down the street and and seeing water... coming under the front doors of MANY homes and heading out to the street.... from BUSTED water pipes...the wife and I assume that the homeowners had gone somewhere else for the holidays....what a horrible way to come home....these several days were the COLDEST days I ever spent in Houston...wrap your outdoor pipes, if your attic is inside your home (not garage) open it slightly to let HEAT into the attic, cover the soffits , outside your house by the kitchen to keep the COLD AIR from hitting your plumbing above you kitchen sink (cardboard works perfectly).....Good Luck!

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Kris Volk

February 13, 2021 at 5:55 pm

Great stuff thanks Matt!

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nat carter

February 13, 2021 at 6:02 pm

Hasn't the location of the reading site for "official" records changed a number of times over the years?

A low of 10° in 1895 (measured at the official site at the time, which I'm guessing was in downtown) could have meant that the temp out in the country (such as where the official site is now, IIRC at Bush airport) was around zero degrees.

If memory serves (a big if) there was an official measuring site for downtown (in addition to the official site for the city of Houston), it's final location, before it was discontinued, was on the Rice campus.

More background here: <https://www.weather.gov/hgx/office>.

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Tropical Tiffy

February 13, 2021 at 6:29 pm

I have to say i was always the one predicting (and fearing) that this would be a bitterly cold winter. We've been constantly downstream of the East Pacific Ridge (the one causing the California drought), and that has lead to an active winter. What was missing most of the winter was bitterly cold air which we have now.

I admit I didn't imagine it would get colder than Jan 2018. In my mind, that was the coldest it could get here but we are going well beyond that right now. I just saw Khou 11 forecast a low of 4 at IAH. UNBELIEVABLE!!!! Count me a bit skeptical it will get quite that cold but for sure this will be the coldest in 30 years.

Can't say I didn't warn you guyz! But at least if we are going to have a cold snap we are shooting the moon with this one and going all the way.

Now i hope there won't be anymore complaining on this board when we get highs in the 80s and low in the 70s and it's cloudy and humid. That type of weather was wayyyy too rare this winter.

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Ivan

February 13, 2021 at 9:34 pm

So do you think this will start happening more often in the next coming winters? I have a feeling it will. We were having downstreams of cool weather since August last year. I'm curious about what you think.

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Ben

February 13, 2021 at 6:31 pm

The 1997 Ice Storm is up there with 1989, and the impact to the region from that '97 storm was much more significant (at least as I remember it). Definitely deserves a mention.

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Matt Lanza

February 13, 2021 at 9:13 pm

Definitely don't disagree, but for this post, we focused on extreme temperatures. Ice storms & snowstorms deserve their own post though, for sure.

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Vivian

February 13, 2021 at 10:46 pm

I remember that one because I'd been home for the holidays from my college in Kentucky, and had a terrible time getting back with the cancelled flights!

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David Painter

February 13, 2021 at 8:07 pm

Hey gang, I didn't see anything mentioned about the Snow we received in February, 1960. I have a photo of our house covered in a lot of snow in Kemah. If you would like to take a look at it let me know how to send it.

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Matt Lanza

February 13, 2021 at 9:11 pm

We were focused mostly on Houston's most extreme temps for this post. Ice storms and snowstorms could take up their own special post!

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Matt Lanza

February 13, 2021 at 9:12 pm

And I would like to see the photo actually! If you could email it. My email is: matt at spacecityweather.com

Tom

February 13, 2021 at 8:07 pm

Matt,

Thanks for your compilation. I have only been in the Houston area since 3Q 2013 however I can relate to the cold of Christmas 1983. I lived in Denver and conditions were brutal there as they pretty well were anywhere east of the Rockies.

Tommy Romano

February 13, 2021 at 9:21 pm

I was a lowly undergraduate in December 1989 and took a job loading 18 wheelers (night shift) in between semester to earn some holiday cash. Working the loading dock that night, I swore it was the coldest I had ever been. It wasn't until I got home after the shift that I learned that it got down to 7F! Couldn't get the water in the shower hot enough to thaw myself out. LOL.

Tom Swinburn

February 14, 2021 at 8:30 am

A few times (very few) as a refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic I had to work in way sub zero walk-ins. No matter the number of layers and how heavy the coat five minutes inside was my limit. I can't FATHOM people living in ares that's an everyday occurrence at certain times of the year. We can gripe about the heat and humidity, but for me extreme cold is far worse. (living in Houston that's a good thing)

Nat Hou

February 14, 2021 at 12:51 am

Holy Cow! I have a copy of that December 23, 1989 Chronicle front page because I'm in the photo. Ain't revealing which one is me. It was afternoon and there weren't many patrons at the museum as it was close to Christmas. So my colleagues and took our break at the hill. We were a little iffy about giving our names to the photographer but figured the guy who signed our paychecks wouldn't mind if the museum's name was in the paper. Then when we saw it we were all miffed because he got the museum's name wrong! Fer cryin' out loud dude, the name on the building was right across the street! Houston Museum of Natural Science, not natural history. It was fun, albeit unusual, break anyway. 😊

Brandy

February 14, 2021 at 1:10 am

I was here for the 1983 Christmas cold snap. As was my sister who was visiting for the holiday. Her visit ended up being longer than anticipated because her flights kept getting cancelled.

Barbara Holt Szalkowski

February 14, 2021 at 1:21 pm

For some reason, I remember a winter streak in December, I thought, in the late 1970s where the actual temperature was at or below freezing for several days, maybe a week? The esplanade between Main and Fannin near Hermann Park/Rice University was covered in beautiful ice formations from the broken sprinklers or something. I can't ever find the data to back up my recollection, although your above description of January 1978 could be what I'm remembering, but I really remember it as a December event, right around Christmas. I remember the 1983 winter as we drove to Amarillo for Christmas and hit Ice at Temple and had to crawl the rest of the way up US 289. Took us *** 21 *** hours to make the drive. At least we made it, though. Had we gone via I-45 and I-20, we'd have been stuck in Dallas as I-20 was closed. Good times!

Mark H

February 14, 2021 at 3:36 pm

I was running a paper in the Texas Highland Lakes in 1989 and the local electric cooperative was nearly brought to its knees with snapped lines (both from tree limbs falling through them and snapping on their own due to the weight of freezing rain). Fish froze in their aquariums because the power was out for so long. That also led to a near statewide power emergency and outage. Mighty close. The Texas grid is designed for freezing temps in Dallas which moderate as temps in Houston freeze. That year, it froze everywhere. Schools and industries that paid an "interruptible rate" which is lower, for natural gas and

electricity were turned off to provide service to residents, grocery stores, hospitals, etc. Things are better now in Texas' energy market. This was a great recap of our "coldest ever"

Comments are closed.